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## Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jflm](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jflm)

## Alcimedès

The Government recently announced that the Forensic Science Service, which is currently a Government Company (“GovCo”) is to close down by 2012 with the loss of 1600 jobs.<sup>1</sup> The reason cited for its closure is financial: the FSS is allegedly losing £2Million a month and the Government has argued that a similar service could be offered by private companies at a cheaper rate. It remains to be seen what effect this decision will have on imminent court cases and the day to day service offered in custody medicine. In response to the Government’s announcement, 33 leading scientists have written to the Times asking for this decision to be re-considered.<sup>2</sup> Amongst the notable signatories is Professor Sir Alec Jeffries, the founding father of “DNA fingerprinting.”

*[In such situations, Alcimedès finds cause to remember that there is a difference between “cheap” and “good value.” A Rolls Royce for sale at £500 is a waste of money...]*

Alcimedès notes that the well-publicised turmoil surrounding the higher echelons of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs appears to be continuing. Widespread resignations and the formation of a breakaway advisory body headed by Professor David Nutt have now been followed by Government proposals to abolish the legal requirement for scientists to be part of the Advisory Council.<sup>3</sup>

The ACMD is central to the Government’s policy on drugs: indeed, the importance of the Council is highlighted by the fact that Section 1 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is itself entitled “The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs.” The Government’s new proposals are part of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill and have attracted widespread criticism from within the scientific and drug rehabilitation communities. However, the Home Office has suggested that their plans will allow greater flexibility to the day-to-day working of the Council.

Meanwhile, the Home Office released its “Drug Strategy 2010”<sup>4</sup> in December 2010 with increased emphasis being placed on local decisions on policy, including former drug addicts acting as mentors or “Community Recovery Champions.” There will also be greater importance placed on stopping consumption of illicit drugs, rather than addicts reducing their use. In contrast, Bob Ainsworth, who was the Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Home Office in charge of drugs policy between 2001 and 2003, has called for all illicit drugs to be legalised in the UK.<sup>5</sup> Mr Ainsworth has alleged that the past 40 years has seen no real progress in the fight against drugs, and that a new approach is required to take the power away from criminals.

An IPCC Report into Deaths in Custody over an 11 year period up to 2009 has demonstrated a decrease in the overall numbers of

deaths.<sup>6</sup> Over this period, there were a total of 333 deaths in custody or shortly after release, which equated to 2.2 deaths per 100,000 arrests. This detailed report suggests a general trend in falling death rates, with 49 deaths in the first year compared with 11 in the final year. In addition, there appears to be a decrease in the number of suicides which may reflect greater identification of at-risk detainees, earlier transfer to hospital, as well as safer cells with fewer ligature points. 90% of the deceased were male, 76% were white, and the average age at death was 39.

Despite this reassuring decline in death rates, the Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine issued a statement warning Forensic Physicians against complacency.<sup>7</sup>

A Home Affairs Committee report<sup>8</sup> has called for a shake-up of gun laws in the wake of the Cumbria and Northumbria shootings in the summer of 2010. The report argues that the current system of 34 pieces of legislation in England and Wales is “complex and confused” and would benefit by being replaced by a single legal and regulatory system. Proposals include the raising of application fees, greater involvement of GPs for new and renewal applications, removal of firearm certificates from individuals if they are sent to prison, and raising the age at which a licence can be granted. Indeed, under the current system, a child can possess a gun, but may not use it unsupervised until the age of fifteen.

The Association of Chief Police Officers has called for debate on the issue of monitoring prostitution in the UK. Deputy Chief Constable Simon Byrne, who is ACPO’s lead on Prostitution and Sexual Exploitation, has made several suggestions including the establishment of a national database on individuals who are convicted of attacking sex workers, the possibility of designated red-light areas and the decriminalisation of brothels.<sup>9</sup> Although prostitution is often light-heartedly dismissed as being “The world’s oldest profession” it remains very dangerous territory for many sex workers who seek such work to fund drug and alcohol problems. Indeed, DCC Byrne’s suggestions come within two weeks of the conviction of Stephen Griffiths for murdering three prostitutes in Bradford: each of his victims had drug or alcohol dependencies.

DCC Byrne’s comments have been welcomed by the International Union of Sex Workers, which campaigns for the “human, civil and labour rights” of individuals involved in the sex and adult entertainment industry.<sup>10</sup>

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